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AUTHOR	Thomas, R. Murray
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ABSTRACT

Recent decades have brought to the fore a coalition of writers on education who identify themselves as postmodernists, a designation that encompasses such vaguely allied groups as critical educators, radical educators, feminists, postcolonialists, anti-imperialists, poststructuralists, postpositivists, and neo-Marxists. A common characteristic displayed by many postmodernists is their writing style--much postmodernist writing about education does not make easy reading. Since postmodernism's critical educators portray themselves as iconoclasts and vigilantes intent on exposing and correcting injustices that are ignored and perpetuated by the people in charge of traditional educational institutions, many of them have deemed it necessary to create new language for expressing their views. That language mainly consists of assigning new meanings to existing words. A glossary of 40-plus common "postmodern" words is offered, with an equal sign connecting each postmodern term to what is considered a synonym or definition using language that should be familiar to teachers. The significant ideas that most postmodern writers on education seek to convey can be communicated more effectively and to a larger audience if they are cast in simpler, less esoteric language. This comunication is supported by a variety of books (which are listed) that use commonly understood language for critically analyzing the traditional exercise of educational power. Contains 23 references. (NKA)

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A Glossary of Postmodern Educational Terms

R. Murray Thomas
University of California, Santa Barbara

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Recent decades have brought to the fore a coalition of writers on education who identify themselves as postmodernists, a designation that encompasses such vaguely allied groups as critical educators, radical educators, feminists, postcolonialists, anti-imperialists, poststructuralists, postpositivists, and neo-Marxists. Thus, postmodernism is not a unified, coherent movement but, rather, an "ill-defined melange of attitudes, theories, and cultural criticism" (Clark, 1993, p. 22). Nevertheless, a characteristic that many postmodernists display in common is their writing style.

One obvious intention of most—if not all—postmodern writers is to recruit additional enthusiasts to their cause. Among the people they hope to attract are teachers from all levels of the schooling hierarchy, preschool through the university (Giroux, 1992, pp. 29-36). However, I must agree with those observers who suggest that a great deal of postmodernist writing about education does not make easy reading (Beyer & Liston, 1996, p. 134). As a teacher of many years, I find this sad, because it limits the dissemination of worthy postmodern ideas and may distort the way people perceive postmodernist proposals. In short, much postmodernists' writing appears ill suited to the goal of attracting a host of adherents. My purpose here is to address this problem by equating a variety of postmodernists' words and phrases with terms that are more familiar to educators in the hope that this may render postmodernist writing easier to understand.

But first, as a preface to the glossary, I believe readers may profit (a) from viewing typical passages of diverse postmodern authors' works that illustrate the readability problem and (b) from considering some possible sources of the problem.

Typical Instances of Postmodernist Writing

At the outset, I recognize that by quoting passages which I claim are typical, I can be charged with distorting reality in two ways—(a) removing passages from their enlightening contexts and (b) offering *exceptional* rather than *typical* examples. In defense of my choices, I maintain that (a) I did not find the contexts of the quoted passages helpful in making the authors' meanings clear and (b) many other examples from the same writings would have served my purpose quite as well. To judge whether such charges are

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warranted, readers can inspect the contents of most of the references at the end of this piece.

Here are five representative excerpts from postmodernists' works that I believe most educators would find difficult to understand.

> "How can a text, which consists of language, be outside languages. How exteriorize the world's jargons without taking refuge in an ultimate jargon wherein the others would simply be reported, cited. . . . How can the text 'get itself out' of the war of fictions, of sociolects?—by a gradual labor of extenuation. First the text liqudates all metalanguage, whereby it is text: no voice (Science, Cause, Institution) is behind what it is saying. Next, the text destroys utterly to the point of contradiction, its own discursive category, its sociolinguistic reference (its 'genre')." (Barthes, 1975, pp. 30-31).

> "The Other in this scenario does not suffer the fate of being generalized out of existence, but bears the weight of historical and cultural specificity. . . . Within this scenario, the relationship between the subject and the object, invention and construction is never innocent and is always implicated in theorizing about the margins and the center. At issue here is an attempt to make problematic the voices of those who try to describe the margins, even when they do so in the interest of emancipation and social justice." (Giroux, 1992, p. 57)

> "I paint these three stances—ventriloquy, "voices." and activism—for feminist researchers to roll around, unpack, try on, discard. It seems crucial in the 1990s that social researchers who seek to be explicitly political (e.g. feminists, African Americans, poststructuralists, neo-Marxists), as well as those who refuse so to acknowledge, should consider aloud, and together, the decisions we have made, through leakage and through pronouncements, in our research." (Fine, 1994, p. 17)

> ". . . plebeian postmoderns [such as Mother Teresa, Gandhi, Polish labor leader Walsea, Russian novelist Solzhenitsyn] . . . seek totality and organize the plurality of selves through a Self above the selves—a dialogic self . . . expressible only through such complex forms as the novel, the drama, or religious ritual. . . . Such a unified and unifying perspective may be inexpressible or currently unknowable, but it is there to be realized in a novel or in a play, in a visionary appropriation of

scripture, or in the transcendental deductions of nonviolent experiments in truth." (Inchausti, 1991, p. 129).

In a chapter on "validity after poststructuralism," Lather wrote:

"What are the antifoundational possibilities outside the limits of normative framings of validity in the human sciences? What might open-ended and context-sensitive validity criteria look like? . . . This paper is situated at the nexus of such doubled questions. Fragmenting and colliding both hegemonic and oppositional codes, my goal is to reinscribe validity in a way that uses the antifoundational problematic to loosen the master code of positivism that continues to so shape even postpositivism. (Lather, 1994, p. 37).

Possible Sources of the Readability Problem

Postmodernism's critical-educators portray themselves as iconoclasts and vigilantes, intent on exposing and correcting injustices that are ignored and perpetuated by the people in charge of traditional educational institutions. "Radical education . . . questions the fundamental categories of all disciplines, and it has a public mission of making society more democratic" (Giroux, 1992, p. 10).

In pursuing their mission of criticizing the status quo, postmodernists often refuse to be limited by educators' traditional ways of speaking.

"Within the field of education the languages that have dominated have generally been languages that have highly instrumentalized the purposes of schooling by either privileging certain groups of elites who become the managers of society or narrowing the scope of education so severely that schools becomes mere factories to train the work force." (Giroux, 1992, p. 11)

Hence, numbers of postmodern writers have deemed it necessary to create new language for expressing their views. In the main, this language does not involve entirely new words and phrases. Instead, it consists of assigning new meanings to existing words, of adopting a less familiar definition of a word from among the multiple meanings listed in a dictionary, and of creating novel metaphors. Teachers' difficulties understanding postmodern writing results partly from the fact that such authors rarely explain—either with definitions or with life-like examples—which meanings they are assigning to such terms as *agency*, *Other*, *deconstruct*, *voices*, *margins*, and more. The authors apparently assume that readers already know the intended meanings (by virtue of considerable experience with postmodern literature) or else that readers can extract the correct meaning from the context of the passage. Among the great majority of teachers, that assumption, I believe, is ill

founded. For most teachers, deciphering what postmodernists write must be a most discouraging chore.

In radical educators' attempt to separate themselves from established educational policy and practice, many have clearly sought to create dramatic figures of speech that furnish novel views of educational events. I have found these similes and metaphors often enlightening, inviting my admiration of the author's ingenuity. But when the device of surprising the reader with analogies is used several times within a single paragraph—and paragraph after paragraph—, the author's style becomes a distraction that is apt to draw the reader's attention away from the content of the work. If readers are constantly remarking "Oh, isn't that a clever phrase" or "how curious" or "how cute," we might suspect that the author's prime aim has been that of a literary stylist—amazing the audience with verbal tricks rather than informing with unencumbered description.

The following glossary is thus intended to be a partial step toward helping typical educators cope with writing styles that result from numerous postmodern authors' beliefs about the sort of language most suitable for expressing their ideas.

The Glossary

Some language habits are shared among a variety of postmodern authors, whereas others are associated with only one or two writers. The items in this glossary are of the former type—terms found in the works of numerous authors. However, the items represent no more than a partial collection, because the list merely illustrates, rather than completely covers, postmodern terminology.

Because writers about critical education seldom define their terms within the documents they produce, I was obliged to develop this glossary by means of inference, that is, by studying a variety of passages that included a particular term and then inferring from the contexts what the term might mean in more familiar vocabulary. Thus, the synonyms that I suggest for postmodern usages are my inferences from contexts. To illustrate the nature of such contexts, I have appended an exemplary sentence to each of the glossary terms. The quoted excerpts are from the following references: Barthes, 1975; Bayard de Volo, 1996; Bonsor, 1994; Fine, 1994; Giroux, 1992; Hall, 1996; Henderson, 1994; Lather, 1994; Le Compte & McLaughlin, 1994; Mirón, 1996; Parry, 1996; Patai, 1994; and Spahr, 1996.

Here, then, is the list of 40-plus common postmodern words, with an equal sign (=) connecting each postmodern term to what I believe is a reasonable synonym or definition cast in language that should be familiar to teachers.

center, margins = The *center* is occupied by the people who control society, whereas *margins* are occupied by victims of injustice (mainly females, selected ethnic groups, gays, the socioeconomically poor, the very young, and the very old).

"The oppression that the center has traditionally practiced is now being challenged by the margins."

discourses, histories, narratives, stories, texts, voices = verbalizations people offer that reveal their viewpoints and experiences

"The center's philosophical position is reflected in its discourses."

"Robert had several narrative voices—that of someone who grew up in poverty, that of an American Indian, that of someone who was gay, that of a university professor, and that of someone who was living with AIDS."

The Other, other = Spelled with a capital *O*, it often means people at the margins—the disadvantaged. Spelled with a lower-case *o*, it often means any individual or group that an author speaks *about* or presumes to speak *for*.

"Postmodern criticism provides an important theoretical and political service in assisting those deemed 'Other' to reclaim their own histories and voices."

agency = influence, participation

"In the process of reading a text, the reader's agency is always reshaping the text."

foundationalism = belief that knowledge is built on a solid, unchallengeable foundation; correct interpretations are ones based on that foundation

"A commitment to foundationalism ignores the fact that human beings are creatures of their particular historical-cultural-linguistic contexts."

antifoundationalism, nonfoundationalism = belief that all knowledge is tentative, and the same data can be interpreted in multiple ways

"We live in an antifoundational era characterized by the loss of certainties and absolute frames of reference."

metanarratives = overarching generalizations or theories that ostensibly provide a correct explanation of a wide range of events

"The goal of paralogy is to foster differences and let contradictions remain in tension rather than trying to legitimate an interpretation with metanarratives."

totalizing = assuming that there is a single, correct interpretation of events

"The teacher seeking to teach black-women studies should resist the temptation of totalizing monologic preaching discourse. The best approach is through a series of dialogic encounters through multiple voices and personalities, a setting that is best achieved in a multicultural classroom."

construct (verb) = offer an interpretation or explanation of something

"In Western researchers' studies of others' cultures, they construct those cultures' traditions."

deconstruct = disagree with, revise, pull apart, or destroy an interpretation of something; reveal a text's inconsistencies and contradictions

"Increasingly, indigenous researchers deconstruct the Westerners' constructions."

"A study of race should attempt to deconstruct whiteness and the privileges associated with it, instead of merely focusing on minorities."

construction = a description or analysis of something

"Postmodernism questions the identity 'woman,' viewing it as an historical construction rather than an apolitical, fixed fact."

reconstruction = a revised description or analysis of something

"I shall now inspect the reconstruction of 'woman' in relation to changes taking place in the political and economic context."

unpack = analyze something into its constituent parts and their interrelationships

"His contribution consisted of unpacking the unequal masculine/feminine power relationship."

space, social space, cultural space = a conceived context or environment within which people interact

"The social space opened up by the reconstitution of student demographics has seriously challenged the idea of a single American identity."

"My normative and aesthetic goals are to provide a cultural space for hope and optimism."

denaturalize, decenter = interpret events in an unconventional way so that a traditional rendition of those events no longer seems suitable or correct

"In her writing, she breaks silences and denaturalizes *what is*."

"Decentering currents of *historicity* [beliefs that individuals' perception of reality is determined by their personal histories of development] dominate much contemporary thought."

colonize = assume an attitude of superior insight, ability, or rights

"The author created a research design that moved her toward unlearning her own privilege and displacing her colonizing gaze."

decolonize = destroy or discredit the notion that the politically dominant group's viewpoints and interpretations are correct

"Her writing style decolonizes the traditional view of what it means to 'read' a text."

inform = explicate, support, give substance to

"I elaborate the principles that inform feminist research."

"Our chapter is informed by our work on the Navajo Indian reservation, as we make sense out of the multiple voices we hear."

frame (noun) = short for "frame of reference"—a viewpoint from which we interpret something

"Postmodernism unsettles all our current critical frames."

frame, reframe (verb) = explain or portray

"Poststructuralists reframe validity as multiple and partial."

code (noun) = language, a set of symbols and their meanings

"The code of the urban street conflicts with the code of the school."

code (verb) = translate or interpret

"The postmodern social analyst looks to history so that past remnants can be 'coded' within a new future vision."

valorize = elevate

"I write out of a feminist poststructural frame where 'getting smarter' about theory valorizes practice."

"The feminist claim presumes to valorize one discourse over another, to distinguish right political goals from wrong ones."

lived culture = the shared values and modes of thought in a group's everyday life

"The innercity students' lived culture is undermined by the school."

problematize = portraying a generally accepted condition as a problem

"By problematizing the validity of tradition, postmodernism has developed a power-sensitive discourse that helps subordinated and excluded groups to make sense out of their own social worlds and histories."

engage = give attention to and comprehend

"I would say that to be a radical educator today you have to engage the Marxist tradition."

self-reflexivity = introspection; critically appraising one's own motives, beliefs, and practices

"My hostile questions are intended to demonstrate just now much of a mental game self-reflexivity has become."

position (verb) = identify (a) the viewpoint from which we interpret our experiences or (b) the social status and viewpoints that we assume others hold

"I positioned myself in a critical stance to deconstruct his argument."

"The students checked out the appearance and habits of the instructor, which presumably allowed them to 'position' one another."

subject, object = The word *subject* is used in two ways: (a) as in syntax, where the subject of a sentence does the action and the object receives the action, so that in research the subject is the researcher conducting the study and the object is the person or group being studied, and (b) as in traditional research-methodology parlance in which the people being studied are called *subjects*.

(a) "In my research, I break with tradition by creating a constantly moving speaking position that fixes neither subject nor object, that disrupts the set boundaries between subjects."

(b) "We selected rebellious youth as our subjects."

feminist pedagogy = a mode of teaching indicative of the feminist role

"Feminist pedagogy promotes classroom interaction in order to provide students with power over knowledge, encourage cooperation, and help in interpreting the social positioning to race, ethnicity, and gender."

language games = manipulating words in ways that (a) have no significance for the conduct of daily life or (b) are intended to distort other people's perception of reality

"What modernists have claimed as discovered truths turn out to be no more than language games."

privilege (verb) = give unusual recognition or opportunity to someone or something

"We must recognize that we are doing research on living beings (or should I not privilege the *living* in preference to those who have passed on?)."

"If a hierarchy of oppression exists in progressive social movements, one that privileges dominant relations of any kind (whether of race, gender, or class categories), the hopes for forging a common purpose in education remain dim."

Conclusion

To complete this glimpse of postmodern language, I offer two closing observations.

First, even though I have tried to be fair and accurate in devising the glossary, postmodern authors may accuse me of distorting their meanings by presuming to translate their words into more commonly used terms. If that is so, and if I have indeed mistaken what they intended, then the condition of much postmodern writing must be even worse than I had imagined—even more troublesome and opaque for teachers whose reading skills are no better than mine.

Second, I am convinced that the significant ideas that most postmodern writers on education apparently seek to convey can be communicated more effectively and to a larger audience if they are cast in simpler, less esoteric language. This suggestion is supported by a variety of books that use commonly understood language for critically analyzing the

traditional exercise of educational power, for encouraging multiple viewpoints, for representing society's disadvantaged and disenfranchised, and for promoting the democratization of schooling. Examples of such publications are Bartoli's *Unequal Opportunity* (1995), Diver-Stamnes' *Lives in the Balance—Youth, Poverty, and Education in Watts* (1994), Grossman and Grossman's *Gender Issues in Education* (1994), Goodlad and Keating's *Access to Knowledge* (1994), and Weis's *Class, Race, and Gender in American Education* (1988).

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